Italian Opera

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Contents

Illustrations

Introduction
The Italianness of Italian Opera

Italy was the birthplace of opera, and has always seemed its most natural habitat. It was there that the speculations and experiments took place that led, in the years around 1600, to the first attempts at composing opera; and for at least 300 years after that, Italian musicians were continuously involved in its development, and made uniquely significant contributions to the art.

Italy's concern with opera has been both longer-lasting and more whole-hearted than that of other nations. Italian composers and dramatists have created a huge proportion of the world's store of opera; Italian singers taught the world the arts of musical representation; Italian audiences found in opera a perfect gratification for their tastes and a complete fulfilment of their ideals and aspirations. It is, of course, perfectly possible for a rational being to prefer Rameau to Scarlatti, or Wagner to Verdi, or Janáček to Puccini; but it is the Italians who represent the mainstream. The Italian tradition is the central tradition, from which Frenchmen and Germans and Slavs have drawn inspiration and sustenance; which they have imitated, refashioned or rebelled against. Italian opera is opera in its quintessence – opera in its purest, most unadulterated and characteristic form.

Humanism

If we go back to the last decades of the sixteenth century, to the period of incubation that preceded the first attempts at opera, one characteristic of Italian art that it seems proper to regard as a national characteristic, is unmistakable. At that time – indeed from the beginning of the Italian Renaissance – educated Italians were obsessively preoccupied with the world of Classical Antiquity. They were, moreover, firmly persuaded that they were themselves the heirs of that world, and that this was an entitlement to be proud of. For while it may have been the Jews that had been the chosen people in the sense of having an unusually developed religious awareness, an acute sense of the presence of God, the ancient Greeks and Romans had been no less a chosen people in the sense of possessing unique human gifts – such gifts as those of wisdom, imagination, creativeness, character. To be a disciple of that ancient Graeco-

Roman humanist wisdom was a vocation scarcely less noble than to be a disciple of the Judaeo-Christian religious revelation.

Few Renaissance Italians doubted that they owed the flourishing of civilized living and the wonderful artistic developments witnessed in their land since the late fourteenth century to the rediscovery of that Ancient World, to the study of its authors and the pondering of its philosophy. And that the Renaissance – the phenomenon that the Florentine Matteo Palmieri described as 'this new age, so full of hope and promise, which already rejoices in a greater array of nobly-gifted souls than the world has seen in the thousand years that have preceded it' (*Della vita civile*, 1531–38, in Woodward 1906: 67) – should have come about in Italy was due, they felt, to Italy's uniquely intimate relationship with the Ancient World. Until comparatively recent times, Latin had been the common language of the Italians, who were otherwise linguistically separated from one another by a multitude of mutually unintelligible dialects; the Italian landscape was full of visible and tangible relics of the glories of the Classical past; and from the time of the Council of Florence (1439), and especially after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (1453), Italy had also become the principal seat of Greek learning. In the eyes of Renaissance Italians, Ancient History was their history, Classical mythology their mythology. Florence, the city at the heart of the Italian Renaissance, liked to think of itself as the 'New Athens on the Arno'.

Of all the ideals inherited by Renaissance Italians from the Ancient World, none was more important than the belief in – to quote the title of a famous fifteenth-century treatise by Gianozzo Manetti – 'the dignity and excellence of man'. Manetti's panegyric is typical of the many essays of the age that established the conviction that man was the supreme glory of the created universe. He speaks of his 'upright carriage, of the beauty and harmony of his body, of the skill and genius by which he has created all the arts of civilization, of his capacity for virtuous living, and of his unique place in the creation as spectator and interpreter of the other works of God' (Robb 1935: 40–1).

What such Renaissance Italians as Manetti felt about the potentiality of human personality could be traced back almost in its entirety to the poetry and philosophy of Classical Antiquity. Greek drama had placed man's capacity for acting on his moral decisions at the centre of its concerns ever since Pelasgos, in Aeschylus' *Hiketides*, had wrestled with the ethical dilemma posed by the refugee suppliants who had come to his city; from the Stoics had come ideals of virtue and glory that sprang from reason, self-knowledge and will-power; from Plotinus and the neo-Platonists a metaphysical justification for man's love and admiration for beautiful things. In the Italian Renaissance the world became man-centred once more. Man – virtuous, heroic, beautiful and passionate – was the central

overwhelming fact of God's creation; 'Man', as the sophist Protagoras had said, '[was] the measure of all things'. This is the fundamental meaning of the word 'Humanism', and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was very largely Classically inspired.

Italian opera originated in a world whose attitudes were conditioned by humanism; and as far as serious opera is concerned, it remained faithful to that ideal throughout its history. Even in the earliest years, when opera was ostensibly mythological, the 'dignity and excellence of man' was the true theme. Orpheus, in Monteverdi's opera, may be a 'Semideo', as the shepherd claims in the first scene of the opera. But when his hour of glory is come, when Charon has been vanquished and the journey into Hades accomplished, what the chorus sings is 'Man undertakes no enterprise in vain.' 'Orpheus . . . moved the audience . . . because he was a man', declared the composer (Arnold 1963: 116). As long as the tradition survives, this humanist inheritance remains a vital ingredient. In Italian opera politics are rare, magical or metaphysical dramas virtually non-existent, mere escapist entertainments commendably few. Man is the theme; the individual personality is the hero; and his deeds, his passions, his pleasures and his sufferings are all treated with an absolute conviction of their reality and seriousness. Of Italian opera specifically we may say what Luigi Barzini said about Italian life in general: 'The pleasure of Italy comes from living in a world made by man, for man, on man's measurements' (1964: 57).

The fact could be illustrated from any of the great repertoires within the Italian tradition – from Venetian opera, or *opera seria*, or *verismo*. My examples are the closing scenes of two Verdi operas, *Rigoletto* and *La traviata*. Each ends with what might be described as a kind of *Liebestod*. To be sure, it is not a Novalis-cum-Schopenhauer-inspired *Liebestod*; rather one in which the afterlife is seen in sentimentalized Christian terms. Both Gilda and Violetta envisage themselves in Heaven, at their prayers among angels and the dear departed. They die in a mood of serene rapture, to that extent resembling Isolde; but that is the limit of the resemblance. In *Tristan und Isolde*, that 'opus metaphysicum of all Art', the Liebestod resolves the unendurable tensions of the drama in what Wagner apprehended as a metaphysical truth. For the Italian artist, the fact of death, whatever mood it may be approached in, is starkly tragic. More precisely, the annihilation of personality appals and terrifies. *Rigoletto* and *La traviata* conclude not in the supreme tranquillity of *Tristan und Isolde*, but with howls of anguish and dismay: 'Ah, la maledizione!'; 'O mio dolor!' This world is the world that matters; the characters whose lives have been devastated by fate are our final concern. Human personality in its human environment, whether flourishing or destroyed, remains the central and ultimate reality of Italian opera.

Sistemazione

A favourite Italian imprecation or threat is 'te sistemo io', which may be rendered approximately as 'I'll sort you out'. The verb 'sistemare' and its derivative noun 'sistemazione' are important words in Italian, with rather more complex and interesting associations than such English phrases as 'sorting out' or 'putting in order'. 'Order' carries with it connotations of pattern, proportion and symmetry. Italians enjoy giving form to things and then embellishing those forms with elegant and decorative surfaces. What foreign visitor to Italy has not been impressed, perhaps initially even repelled, by the geometrical formality of the Italian garden? And can the inspiration of perspective and mathematics be easily forgotten in the paintings of Renaissance Florence? What an incomparable stroke of musical *sistemazione* it was, when Vivaldi divined the ritornello form in the confusion of variegated colours, antiphonies in space, and contrasting levels of technical prowess that had been typical of the early concerto. Dante, the greatest of Italian poets, creates patterns out of Hell itself. In Italy 'to *sistemare* all things is considered to be the foremost, perhaps the unique, mission of man on earth' (Barzini 1964: 112).

This enthusiasm for formal lucidity, this tendency to reduce the multitudinous activities of mind and hand to forms and patterns, is inseparable from the Italian genius for decoration. For the obsession with creating patterns presupposes a love of the patterns themselves; and what Italians love they have adorned with all the abundance of their exuberant fancies. Thanks to this decorative flair the mere pattern becomes a work of art; even the trivial formalities of everyday life can become at least elegant rituals. 'Everything must be made to sparkle, a simple meal, an ordinary transaction, a dreary speech, a cowardly capitulation must be embellished and ennobled with euphemisms, adornments and pathos' (*ibidem*: 75). Against the French pride in the *mot juste*, we may set the Italian delight in pattern, ritual and adornment. This delight I would claim as a second *Leitmotiv* in Italian opera.

It has always been recognized as such by perceptive critics. Has there ever been a better evocation of the character of Rossinian *opera buffa* than Stendhal's, who called it 'chaos organized and made perfect'? Einstein writes of Verdi's *Macbeth* that 'where with Shakespeare mist arises, with Verdi something takes on form' (1947: 277). And what is Boito's celebrated article on form and formula in Italian opera but the same insight expressed from a hostile point of view? 'Since opera has existed in Italy down to our own times, we have never had true operatic form, but always only the diminutive, the formula' (quoted Walker 1962: 451). All great Italian artists have abhorred disorder. No matter how violent or complex the action, no matter how frenzied and manic the passions, Italian opera has

resolved them into patterns in sound, ritualized and decorative structures – 'formulas' if one will – which tame their wildness and civilize them.

Since the whole Italian tradition of opera is pervaded by such *sistemazione*, it does not much matter where we look for examples. The very earliest operas, in theory, took their form from the text; it was a case of *prima le parole, dopo la musica*. But one need not spend many minutes with the score of *Orfeo* to see that this is simply not true. The whole opera is a glorious monument to the Italian genius for *sistemazione*, a rich pattern of ritornellos and refrains and variations. Of course the pattern is congruous with the drama, but in no way can it be described as a necessary consequence of the drama. *Opera seria* is another case in point. There are several perfectly sound aesthetic arguments in favour of its schematic structure and of the ubiquitousness of the so-called *da capo* aria, and they will be discussed at the appropriate point in this book. Meanwhile let it be observed that, for all that, the *opera seria* is another manifestation of the national love of ritualized order.

What is true of Italian opera in its broadest outlines is no less true of the details of its musical forms. There cannot be many operatic scenes more emotionally turbulent than that of the quartet in Act III of *Rigoletto*. Set at night, at a derelict riverside tavern on the outskirts of Mantua, a thunderstorm brewing in the distance, the scene depicts a complex turmoil of conflicting passions. Within, the libertine Duke flirts with the harlot Maddalena; their conversation is overheard by the seduced and betrayed Gilda, lurking outside in the street with her father, the hunch-backed jester Rigoletto, who meditates revenge. Yet in the great ensemble that distills the emotions of this harrowing scene, Verdi creates a beautifully poised form, an exquisite pattern of lights and shades, of symmetries and contrasts in perfectly balanced equilibrium.

The primacy of song

It was, of necessity, in Italy that the opportunities and problems inherent in the blending of drama and song were first recognized. And it is a critical commonplace to recognize that, very rapidly, Italian composers found a more conspicuous role in opera for song than composers working in any other tradition. What is perhaps less generally recognized is that a certain sleight of hand was necessary to bring about this state of affairs. In so far as early opera was an attempt to revive the tragic drama of the ancient Greeks, song in the sense of formal aria had no real part in it: in principle, the essentials were recitative and chorus. But in fact, consciously or unconsciously, musicians and poets compromised the spirit of tragedy with the spirit of pastoral drama. They did this in order to make more natural, or at least more plausible, that fusion of poetry and song that

haunted their imaginations, and which, they were convinced, represented the most perfect achievement of Classical art.

The pastoral world was the appropriate world for the realization of such dreams. It is one of the principal functions of the pastoral convention to undo the corruption and decadence of 'real' life, to circumvent even the Fall itself, and to create an Utopian dream of man's life as it might have been, a vision of a Golden Age in some far distant time or place – often identified as Arcadia – where ideals of love and beauty are untarnished and all the most poignant yearnings of the human spirit may be stilled. In such a world, poetry and song were as natural to the nymphs and shepherds and demigods who peopled it, as conversational prose is to the decadent here-and-now. And for centuries artists played upon this deeply ingrained belief, filling their 'pastoral' novels with exquisite lyrics, as Boccaccio was already doing in *Ameto* in the fourteenth century; and filling their 'pastoral' poems and dramas with song and dance, as, to cite simply the most momentous example, Poliziano did in his *Orfeo*, first performed in Mantua in 1480. It was largely in order to justify a profusion of song and dance that the composers of the first operas employed pastoral themes, concerning themselves almost exclusively with that pre-lapsarian Golden Age when 'language was flowery and sweet, so that it had melody in every part . . . when music was natural and speech was like poetry' (G. B. Doni, quoted in Solerti 1903: 203). It is no mere chance that finds the earliest operas full of nymphs and shepherds, and with such heroes as Apollo and, above all, Orpheus, the semi-divine shepherd, who, according to legend, was the most magically gifted musician of all Antiquity.

While the operas of Rinuccini, Peri and Caccini are ostensibly attempts at reviving the Greek tragic drama, they in fact relied heavily on the pastoral convention to motivate the conspicuous role they assigned to music. Greek tragedy may have been sufficient justification for the chorus and for the recitative style. But the precise philosophy behind the use of virtuosic and enrapturing song was a little ambiguous; it depended upon a mixing of the genres, and on peopling the drama with characters of the right kind, like Orpheus. Such problems and ambiguities were, however, rapidly resolved. The primacy of song and a magnificently sure intuition of its function in the new art are already unmistakable in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*.

It will be remembered that, while the prologue of Rinuccini and Peri's *Euridice* is assigned to an allegorical figure representing the spirit of Tragedy, Striggio and Monteverdi's prologue is sung by *La musica*. The significance of this shift of emphasis from tragedy to music has often been commented on. Equally important is what Music tells us about herself:

> I am Music, who with my sweet accents
> Can soothe every troubled heart,
> I can inspire – now with noble rage, now with love –
> Even the coldest hearts.

> Singing to my golden lyre
> I sometimes soothe the ears of mortals;
> And in this manner incline their souls
> To desire the harmonies of the celestial lyre.

Song may have symbolized a vanished pastoral paradise, but Music assures us that it has more direct and urgent functions in drama. It soothes, it enchants, it elevates and inspires. But especially song stirs the passions, it enflames 'even the coldest heart now with noble rage and now with love'. Ever since Monteverdi, Italian and Italianate composers of opera have fulfilled the promises of that prologue almost as if it were a manifesto. Of course all have recognized, in a variety of ways, that opera is a form of dramatic *Gesamtkunstwerk*; but within that *Gesamtkunstwerk* the Italian composer has always regarded his principal task as being that of stirring the passions by song. Italians in their singing, remarked Mersenne, 'represent for all they are worth the passions and affections of the mind and soul, for example, anger, fury, rage, spite, swooning and several other passions, and they do this with incredible violence' (Fortune 1954: 211). Scarlatti in the eighteenth century would have endorsed Music's claim, and so would Puccini have done in the twentieth. But no one proclaimed the creed more trenchantly than Bellini, who, exasperated by the intellectual pretensions of Carlo Pepoli, the librettist of *I Puritani*, cried, 'Carve in your head in letters of adamant: *the music drama must draw tears, inspire terror, make people die*, through singing' (1943: 400).

The primary role played in the Italian tradition of opera by impassioned song has very much conditioned composers' attitudes to the types of drama that might be employed. If the characters are continually to indulge in what W. H. Auden called 'a form of public outcry' (1968: 88) about their emotional life, clearly a very particular style of drama is postulated. Italian opera demands a wide range of moods – without that, chronic monotony would set in at an early stage; and it demands character-types that are energetic, articulate and passionate. Introspective, secretive or frigid types would be a contradiction in terms. The matter is epitomized in Verdi's attempts to turn Shakespeare's greatest tragic heroes into operatic figures. (*King Lear* we will leave out of consideration as too complex an enterprise to be described in summary terms.) *Othello* yields a towering masterpiece, *Macbeth* a fascinating and high-minded but in the end not quite convincing problem-opera, *Hamlet* an utterly abortive project, abandoned the moment it was seriously thought about.

A language for singing

There can be few music libraries which do not have their copies of Mozart's *Il flauto magico* or Meyerbeer's *Gli Ugonotti*. Apt to provoke little more today than a condescending smile, these Italian translations of the standard

German and French operas are certainly relics of an age with different priorities from our own. I merely observe that in the days when the quality of the singing was the fundamental issue in the operatic experience, virtually all connoisseurs were of the opinion that Italian lent itself uniquely well to the purpose. 'There can be no doubt' – asserted Vaccai in his classic textbook of vocal method, the *Metodo pratico* of 1832 – 'but what the Italian language . . . by virtue of its euphony, is best suited to the art of singing' (Vaccai 1978: 3).

Italian is a Romance language, one of the family of languages derived from the Latin spoken throughout most of south and west Europe during the centuries of the Roman Empire. Indeed, for obvious geographical and historical reasons, it has remained the most central Romance language; not only retaining many Latin elements, but periodically delayed or diverted in its natural vernacular development by the readoption of Latinisms. This process might be seen as beginning as early as 825 when Lotario (the Frankish Emperor Lothair I) attempted to re-establish a cultivated Latin by instituting eight royal schools in northern Italy; but it was most marked during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when humanist scholarship continually encouraged emulation of the classics.

One other historical peculiarity of Italian must be mentioned: the quite exceptional degree to which it became a language cultivated for literary and artistic purposes, rather than for everyday use. It was only in the wake of the *langue d'oil* and the *langue d'oc* of the trouvères and troubadours that the vernacular dialects of the Italian peninsula began to gain literary respectability. The first was Sicilian, which was widely read, copied and imitated during the thirteenth century; while Tuscan attained the status of a great literary language with Dante (1265–1321). Tuscan too were Petrarch (1304–74) and Boccaccio (1313–75), so that, by the end of the fourteenth century, their vernacular had acquired a prestige unique among the Italian dialects. Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio came to be treated like the Latin authors of the classical past, monumentalized as exemplars of grammar, diction, imagery and style. By the fifteenth century 'the terms "vernacular", "Florentine", "Tuscan", "Italian", were used promiscuously and apparently indifferently' (Migliorini and Baldelli 1964: 123). Thereafter, the introduction of printing, the scholarly care devoted to editorial work on the Italian classics of the fourteenth century, humanist debate in the academies, more centralized and bureaucratic governments in place of the communes of the Middle Ages, all encouraged the development of a more standardized, educated Italian. These tendencies came to a climax with the appearance in 1612 of the *Vocabulario* issued by the Accademia della Crusca, the first great, comprehensive dictionary to be produced for any modern language. But the *Vocabulario* was not concerned with 'Italian as she is spoken', rather with 'strict adherence to the

criterion of an archaizing Florentinism' (Migliorini and Baldelli 1964: 195).

The corollary to this attitude to the Italian language as an achievement of art remote from the needs of mundane, everyday communication was the intense and highly individual development of a multitude of regional dialects. Given the low level of literacy in Italy there was nothing to check this development until the Unification of 1861. At the Unification less than a quarter of Italians were literate; and the number who spoke 'Italian' was probably less than 10 per cent.

Meanwhile, largely insulated from the needs of real life, Italian writers were free to cultivate a language which they felt to be uniquely pure, sweet and euphonious. Certainly it is a language that lent itself superbly to song. It has an unusually high proportion of vowels to consonants, especially of those clear bell-like vowels, the 'a' and 'e' sounds that resonate in the roof of the mouth; and that is, in Rossini's words, 'the transmitter par excellence of beautiful sounds' (Michotte 1968: 115). What the seventeenth-century composer Ottavio Durante called the 'odious vowels', 'i' and 'u', which constrict the emission of sound, or push the singer towards a falsetto style, are never so frequent that the composer cannot avoid placing long notes or coloratura passages on them – in 1624 Crivellati compared roulades on 'i' and 'u' with quacking and howling (Fortune 1954: 216). At the same time, Italian is strongly accented and decisively articulated. While the clusters of consonants that fracture the flow of tone are largely avoided 'yet the articulations of its consonants, are more firm, vigorous and poignant, than in any other language'; and 'a neat, clear and articulate pronunciation of consonants is as necessary to the intelligence of what is singing, as open vowels are to its being well sung' (Burney 1789: 502). The cantabile qualities of the language are much enhanced by virtue of another factor: 'the passage from one word to another can be made with the greatest fluency, since all its words, whether nouns or verbs, end in a vowel, a few monosyllables excepted' (Arteaga 1785: 84). This was an asset that came to be fully realized in the eighteenth century when, under French influence, Italian poets learned to eschew Latinate inversions, and to cultivate a simple sentence construction in which 'the linear phrase tended to replace the architectonic' (Migliorini and Baldelli 1964: 230): this unaffected syntax was surely one of the sources of the fabled singing quality of Metastasio's verse.

Not the least musical feature of the language arose from the temperament with which it and its related dialects were used by native speakers. Comparing, perhaps somewhat gratuitously, the vivacious and imaginative Italians with the 'impassive' Muscovites and the 'bellowing' Swiss, Arteaga noted that their language 'seems full of interjections, of exclamations, of distinct and perceptible tones' (*suoni spiccati e sensibili*) (1785: 103). Burney

commented that 'every dialect has peculiar inflexions of voice, which form a kind of *tune* in its utterance' and that Italian had 'a greater compass and variety of intervals in this colloquial *tune* or *cantilena*, than any other [language] with which I am acquainted' (1776–89: 500). Modern phoneticians confirm that 'Italian seems to be sung, with sinuous pitch movement over two octaves' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 15th edn, s.v. 'Romance Lan guages'). When Burney conversed with Metastasio 'on the euphony of languages', and commended Italian as 'more favourable . . . for Music, than any other European tongue', the poet cried out 'È la musica stessa'[1] (Burney 1776–89: 500).

One must also record some reservations. In any age when the enchantment of opera was primarily due to the magic of great singing, it was a source of nothing but gratification that Italian avoided the non-cantabile elements of other European languages. It suffered neither from the mutes and nasals of French, nor from the guttural consonant conglomerations of German, nor from the hissings and chewed diphthongs and backward consonants of English. Its brilliance and sonorousness as a singing language were indeed beyond compare; but as Gounod said, 'is brilliance and sonority everything in music?' What about the nuance, the half-shadow, the understatement? These, it may be conceded, have not been the strengths of Italian opera. The language has contributed its part to a tradition that has been more notable for an extrovert, flamboyant, rhetorical kind of theatricality. Gounod continued, 'Do you know what I compare the Italian language with? A magnificent bouquet of roses, peonies, crocuses, rhododendrons . . . but wanting heliotropes, mignonettes, violets . . .' (Reichenburg 1937: 98–9).

By the second half of the nineteenth century there were also those who noticed that the facility with which the Italian language could be turned into full-throated song was having a detrimental effect on composers' rhythmic resource. The strong accentuation and the pure, resonating vowels led to a convention of word-setting that Boito was to denounce as a 'cantilena of symmetry . . . that mighty dowry and mighty sin of Italian prosody which generates a meanness and poverty of rhythm within the musical phrase' (Budden 1978: 16–17). This was in the context of an essay in which he commended Verdi for seizing the opportunity offered by the French language in *Les Vêpres siciliennes* for escaping into more fluid and varied rhythmic patterns.

Conviviality

The last of these national characteristics that have dictated the tone of Italian opera is a quality I would describe as conviviality. It was less a feature of the operas themselves than of the atmosphere and environment in which they were performed. But since opera is supremely a social form of

art, the conviviality of the setting did affect the work of art in a number of ways.

Conviviality developed a little more slowly than the other qualities I have been describing. The Italian language, obviously, was there from the start; the humanist sensibility too; *sistemazione* and the primacy of song are accomplished facts within the first decade of opera's history. Conviviality was perhaps not an established condition before the second half of the seventeenth century. Thereafter it is constantly present, surviving until the early decades of the present century, when it was destroyed, largely by the work of Toscanini.

Three crucial steps taken during the Italian phase of Toscanini's conducting career epitomize this rooting-out of conviviality. First, at Genoa and Turin, in the early 1890s, we find him refusing to countenance any longer the *ad hoc* orchestral ensembles that were assembled to accompany the opera in many Italian cities at this time. At his insistence, orchestras and later choruses became as thoroughly professional as the soloists; no one was admitted to them any longer without a rigorous audition. Secondly, during the 1906–07 season at La Scala, Toscanini banned the encore; and thirdly, at the beginning of the great decade 1920–29 during which he restored La Scala's reputation as the first opera-house in the world, he brought about a complete reorganization of the principles of theatre life, one of the results of which was the abolition of the old box-system. No longer were the boxes in the theatre private property, passed down in the wealthy families of the city from generation to generation; they became available to any member of the public who cared to pay the appropriate admission fee. No bungling amateurism, then, no encores, no private boxes: Toscanini's ideals were those of uncompromising professionalism, of the integrity of the work of art, of the theatre as a temple sacred to the muses, not merely a social amenity.

The box-system that Toscanini dismantled in 1920 had been the backbone of Italian theatre life for the best part of 300 years. From Venice, where it had first evolved as a form of insurance, it had spread rapidly to the other cities of Italy. Where it was not commercially necessary, as at some of the court operas, it was nevertheless retained because to have one's box at the opera was recognized as a charming social asset. Considering the fact that the system survived for three centuries in many cities very different in social and political character, it underwent remarkably few modifications; and it affected the whole Italian attitude to theatre-going. Above all a box of one's own, a supernumerary drawing-room as it were, which just happened to be at the theatre, did encourage people to go to the opera regularly, night after night, as a matter of course. The box was their public salon: there they could meet their friends, there they could mingle with the best society of the town.

The effect of the box-system on theatrical manners is not immediately

apparent from such seventeenth-century reports as survive. The diarist John Evelyn, for example, visited the opera in Venice frequently during his stay in the city in 1645. He was amazed by the spectacle, and enthralled by the singing of the *castrati*; but he has nothing to say about the social life of the theatre. Perhaps the art form was still too new, too fascinating and too surprising, at least for a visitor, for him to notice anything but the essentials. But by the time we come to the eighteenth-century accounts, France, Germany and England all have their own operatic traditions. Visitors can compare theatre life in Venice or Naples with theatre life in Paris or London, and they begin to evince surprise at some of the practical consequences of the system. 'The pleasure these people take in music and the theatre is more evidenced by their presence than by the attention they bestow on the performance', writes Charles de Brosses in 1739. '. . . Chess is marvellously well adapted to filling in the monotony of the recitatives, and the arias are equally good for interrupting a too assiduous concentration on chess' (Grout 1947: 197–8). In Venice, in the 1790s, reports a German traveller, Johann Christoph Maier, 'there is a constant noise of people laughing, drinking, and joking, while sellers of baked goods and fruit cry their wares aloud from box to box' (*ibidem*). But perhaps the most interesting of the eighteenth-century accounts is that of Giuseppe Baretti, who in 1769 published a book on Italian manners, specifically designed to correct the misleading impressions given by the reports of casual visitors, particularly those of the surgeon Samuel Sharp, author of a volume of *Letters from Italy*. When it came to opera, Baretti did not deny the talk and laughter and inattention. On the contrary, his defence of his fellow countrymen was to assert that this kind of behaviour showed their good sense.

> Singing is only a diversion, and attended to with no more seriousness than a diversion deserves. I have told you already, that we have so great a plenty of music in Italy as to have very good reason to hold it cheap; and every sensible Englishman must wonder at [Mr Sharp's] solemnity of scolding, as if we were committing murder when we are talkative in the pit, or form ourselves into card-parties in our boxes . . . When we are at the opera we consider [the singers] in the lump as one of the many things that induced us to be there; and we pay the same attention to their singing which we pay to other parts of that diversion . . . (Baretti 1769: 302–3)

When we reach the nineteenth century the picture does not change, it only becomes more vivid and in some respects more surprising, because the men and women who used the boxes were no longer rationalists like Baretti, sceptical of the real worth of opera as an art-form, but often real enthusiasts. A good example is Stendhal. From his *Life of Rossini* and his journal *Rome, Naples and Florence in 1817* we know that Stendhal adored music, was deeply moved by it and wrote about it with unique perception. Yet this is what he has to say about the opera-going habit: